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“MAKING EFFECTIVE LEARNING POSSIBLE IN TWO ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF BLENDED FACE TO FACE/ONLINE TEACHING: THE STUDENTS’ VERDICT”

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Abstract

*This paper discusses two different approaches to a blended face to face/online teaching delivery model trialled in 2004 and 2005 in a unit entitled *Alternative Justice Processes*. Both approaches aimed to make effective learning possible for students. However, student evaluations of the unit indicated that only one model was accepted by students as having created an effective learning environment. This paper uses Ramsden’s six key principles of effective learning to explore the different reactions of the students to the two models.*

Keywords

blended, online, learning, flexible, face to face, effective, student

Introduction

Australia’s tertiary education environment is embracing e-learning opportunities (DEST, 2002). Queensland University of Technology (QUT), for example, states in its 2004 *Blueprint* that it is committed to increasingly using information and communication technology to “transform our teaching and learning in ways which engage and challenge students, and which enable different learning environments, on-campus and off-campus, to be used in ways which are complementary and mutually reinforcing” (QUT, 2004, 4). These goals reflect the recommendations of QUT’s 2003 review of online teaching “to develop a whole of learning approach to the integration of online with on campus” and strategies for evaluating “student learning outcomes from their whole learning experience (including online pedagogy)” (QUT, 2003).

This paper documents a project in which two alternative approaches to a blended face to face (f2f)/online teaching delivery model were trialled in a unit entitled *Alternative Justice Processes* in 2004 and 2005. Both versions of the model aimed to make effective learning possible for students. However, formal and informal student evaluations of the unit in both years indicated that students accepted only the latter model as having created an effective learning environment. This paper uses Ramsden’s six key principles of effective teaching to explore the differences between the two models and to highlight the key characteristics of the successful version.

QUT Teaching Fellowship Project 2005

The development of the student-supported model, discussed in this paper, was made possible through the support of a QUT Teaching Fellowship for the author in 2005. QUT’s Teaching Fellowship program is designed to encourage, reward and support the development, enhancement and recognition of teaching and effective learning at QUT (QUT Teaching Fellows, 2005). The program for 2005 involved Fellows using the units they teach as models for exploring the effective integration of educational technology to enhance learning environments, and to create optimal learning outcomes for students. In the author’s case, the unsuccessful model trialled in *Alternative Justice Processes* in 2004 was used to explore these issues (Field, 2004). This elective unit, offered annually in semester 1 to second and third year students, usually had an enrolment of about 70 students in both years of delivery relevant to this study.

The concept of effective learning and teaching

Truly effective teaching is about more than simply making student learning possible; as student learning can be possible on a number of different levels, ranging from deep to superficial. The term ‘effective teaching’ is used, then, in this paper, to mean teaching that facilitates deep learning outcomes for students; where the promotion of high quality cognitive engagement is encouraged, and superficial understanding is discouraged (Ramsden, 1992, 86). Making effective learning possible requires teachers to take a student-centred, outcome-focused perspective. It requires an ability to motivate students to learn through the teaching process (Włodkowski, 1999); and to deliver learning activities that promote connection and discussion (Dunkin, 1983, 75; Cannon, 1988, 3) in ways that allow for egalitarian participation (Bender, 2003, 65). Effective teaching also takes some account of the different learning styles and preferences of students.

Model 1 - 2004 (the one that didn’t work)

Model 1 was comprised of three key blended components designed, in theory at least, to work together to achieve effective learning for students. The first component involved a detailed study guide workbook following a modular, structured approach to the provision of comprehensive written unit content. The workbook incorporated content, key summaries, readings, thinking points and discussion questions. It was designed to obviate both the need for a unit textbook, and the provision of ‘lecture notes’ to students. The workbook provided an explicit foundation for content and concept learning in the unit, and was used as the foundational learning tool to support the model as a whole.

The second component of Model 1 involved replacing f2f traditional lectures with active learning f2f workshops (Gibbs, 1982; Hativa, 2000). These took place for the first 6 weeks of the semester, and were designed to use active engagement to build a strong, trusting community of learning amongst the students, as well as creating an enthusiastic, motivating learning environment that would both encourage deep learning and establish a learning collective that could be transferred to the online environment in the last 6 weeks of the semester. (See Field (2004) for some examples of the f2f strategies employed.) The f2f weeks of the unit were also used to consult and negotiate with students about the unit delivery model and key assessment issues.

The third component of the model involved the last 6 weeks of the semester occurring entirely online, with no f2f contact (Bender, 2003). Discussion fora were the focus for online learning activity and interaction. These discussions were not assessed, and participation was voluntary. They were made up of structured topics based on the study guide workbook; and were specifically designed to have no right or wrong answer, but rather allow for (and in fact encourage) a range of possible correct responses and perspectives.

The decision to blend online and f2f teaching in *Alternative Justice Processes* had been made carefully, with the design intention firmly focussed on ensuring a quality yet flexible student-centred learning environment. The model had been explicitly explained, unpacked and negotiated with students, to achieve a collective understanding of, and commitment to, the model’s objectives (Campbell-Gibson, 2000, 157). Preliminary indications, obtained via an informal survey of students in the first week of semester, were that the students were enthusiastic about the potential of the model. Their comments indicated that they valued how the approach recognized and responded to both their learning and their life needs.

Nevertheless, at the end of the first semester in 2004, this model was categorically rejected by the students in terms of being an effective learning environment. The Student Evaluation of Unit and Teaching (SEUT) (to which 12 of 60 students provided a response) rated the unit only 2.9 on a scale of 5 (where 5 is the best). Of particular concern was the fact that a significant majority of students disagreed with the statement that “The teaching methods used in this unit work together to help me learn.” The qualitative comments clearly indicated that it was the author’s design and management of the online element of the unit with which the students had most difficulty. Student comments included for example:

- “The online part of the subject, whilst convenient, didn’t assist my learning at all. Online discussion does not assist learning because people don’t tend to contribute.”

- “I would have preferred not to have had the OLT part of the unit. I would have done it externally if I’d known.”
- “Lectures should have been kept instead of online.”
- “Have lectures for the whole semester!”

Only one student provided a positive comment: “Don’t give up on the OLT delivery. Flexible options are helpful and students need to help themselves.” This lone expression of support was an important impetus to the development of the 2005 model.

Model 2 - 2005 (the one students supported)

The redesigned blended model of 2005 was based on critical reflection about Model 1 and the students’ reactions, and constructive comment and suggestion received at the OLT Conference 2004 (Field, 2004). The reflections resulted in significant alterations being made, but also in the retention of the core elements of design. Model 2, like the 2004 model, involved a foundational study guide workbook, f2f action learning lectorials, and online discussion as the three key approaches to achieving effective learning for students. There were four fundamental changes to Model 1, however.

First, the 6 weekly block division of online and f2f methods was substituted with an alternate weekly format. That is, the f2f workshops took place in the first two weeks of the semester and then every alternate week. The design of the first two f2f sessions specifically focussed, amongst other things, on developing a relationship and rapport between the students, as well as between the students and the lecturer. This relationship was considered critical, not only for the effective facilitation of an active and motivated f2f learning environment, but also in terms of encouraging participation in the online component of the model. The contrast with the 2004 model is that this relationship, which was strongly developed in the first 6 week block, was lost with the move to online. Some students experienced a sense of abandonment as a result. In the 2005 model the relationship was nurtured and maintained through scheduled ongoing f2f contact throughout the semester.

The second key change was that in 2005, consultation and negotiation with students about the unit delivery model and key assessment matters (such as the marking criteria for the online discussions) were finalised and formalised into a collective learning contract that was provided to all students via the online teaching site (Anderson, Boud, Sampson, 1996). This contract acted as a reference point throughout the semester, and contributed (in my view) to the development of a community of learning in the unit. In 2004, discussions and negotiations had not been formalised.

The third critical difference was that the online discussions were assessed and given an allocation of 30% of the overall unit grade. Negotiations with the students resulted in these 30 marks being divided into 6 marks for each week of the semester spent online. The 2004 model expected voluntary participation online and made assumptions about the students’ motivation to participate that were not fulfilled.

The final key difference in the 2005 model was the explicit use of Laurillard’s ‘conversational framework’ to provide a clear structure, and theoretical foundation, to the learning and teaching approach that the students could connect with. This framework upheld the f2f and online discussion elements of the model, with the study guide workbook acting as a foundation to it.

Student feedback on the model used in the unit in semester 1 2005 was predominantly positive. In week 8 of the semester, 20 students of a cohort of 67 responded to a formal voluntary online SEUT unit evaluation. On the same scale (referred to above) of 1-5 (where 5 is the best) the unit scored 4.6 with 19 students saying that overall they rated the unit as being good or very good. All students who responded to the evaluation either agreed or strongly agreed that the teaching methods used in the unit worked together to help them to learn; that the assessment criteria explained clearly how the assessment items were to be marked; and that they understood the requirements of the overall assessment program. Fifteen of the 20 students strongly agreed that the author had developed a class atmosphere that helped them to learn, and 19 students agreed or strongly agreed that online resources had been used in ways to help their learning.

Some students chose independently to provide further written feedback about their experience of the unit. One student wrote: “*Alternative Justice Processes* has been a valuable unit within the Justice degree. It has adapted to student needs in its method of assessment and appreciation of this has been shown in the quality of contributions made particularly within the online component. The flexibility and support of the unit coordinator has ensured a constructive and positive learning environment where students have participated on a high level.”

Making effective learning possible – using Ramsden’s six key principles of effective teaching to understand the different student responses to the 2004 and 2005 models

The goal of using a blended learning environment to make effective learning possible for students (Laurillard, 2002, 11; Ramsden, 1992, 5) was at the centre of both the models trialled and became a particularly important driver in the context of the 2005 Teaching Fellowship. As effective learning is directly correlated with, and causatively linked to, effective teaching, this section of the paper discusses Ramsden’s six key principles of effective teaching (Ramsden, 1992, 86) in the context of the two models and explores how the four key changes in the 2005 model contributed to the students’ perspective that it had more successfully created an effective student learning environment than the 2004 model.

Principle 1: Interest and explanation

Ramsden’s first principle of effective teaching is that of ensuring student interest (which includes making learning of unit material a “pleasure” for students) and providing skilled explanation (Ramsden, 1992, 96). The three components of the approach taken in both years involved a design that integrated the study guide workbook, the f2f active learning sessions, and the online discussions, to work together to achieve and maintain student interest in the unit. The workbook was a consistent factor across both models and was constructed to provide a skilled and interesting written explanation of unit content. As such, it functioned as a consistent base learning tool. This allowed students a level of security and confidence in terms of knowledge about unit content, which in turn allowed them to focus on developing their interest in the subject through the active learning aspects of the f2f and online components. In the 2005 model it appears to be not the workbook, but rather the difference in approach to the f2f and online components that was critical to facilitating a higher level of interest and explanation, thus creating a more effective learning environment.

Critical factors that differentiated the approaches were the structural issues (6 week block versus alternate weeks f2f and online), and also importantly, the explicit theoretical grounding of the teaching method in Laurillard’s ‘conversational framework’ (2002, 86-89). This framework, based as it is on “iterative dialogue”, and conversational activity that is “discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective” (Laurillard, 2002, 86) provided an enjoyable learning environment that gained student interest. The students were introduced to the framework in the first lecture and were encouraged to see its integration in both the f2f and online environments. It seems apparent that the framework provided a legitimizing connector between f2f and online student experiences, particularly for those students who valued f2f environments more highly. Clarity of explanation and interest were therefore facilitated through the provision of a conceptual model to learning that “made sense” to students and allowed them to see how they could learn effectively in both f2f and online environments. Both environments then became places where unit content and concepts could be questioned, unpacked and explored through critical dialogue. This was interesting and fun.

In contrast, the 2004 model did not have a conceptual framework to the blended way in which the students were being asked to learn. It may, therefore, not have seemed systematic or purposeful to them. The six week f2f block of the semester worked relatively well in terms of engagement with and by students, but was very much reliant on the lecturer’s energy and commitment to motivate student learning (Wlodkowski, 1999). The online 6 week block, however, failed to maintain student interest or motivation, and participation rates were low. As there was no f2f contact during the online block to regenerate or rebuild interest, many students appeared to experience a lost sense of connection with the unit, the lecturer and their peers. For these students the study guide workbook worked counter to the

author's objectives by allowing them to 'opt out' and to learn independently away from the online environment in an isolated fashion.

Principle 2: Concern and respect for students and student learning

Ramsden's second principle of effective teaching in universities is that of demonstrating concern and respect for students and student learning. That is, it is considered mandatory for good teaching, and therefore essential for effective learning, that teachers are conscious and considerate of students (Ramsden, 1992, 97). In both models developed in this project, a number of key approaches were central to demonstrating concern and respect for students, all of which focused on explicit and personal communication and consultation with them. In both models, negotiations and consultations occurred with students at the start of the semester, and responses were integrated as far as possible into the implementation of the models; students were surveyed across the semester informally about the effectiveness of the model and then formally at the end of the semester; and efforts were made within the context of the unit to 'close the loop' on student feedback to demonstrate that their contributions had been valued. Other consistent strategies across the two models included extensive use of online notices and emails in which attempts were made to replicate elements of f2f communication; for example, using a clear and energetic tone, and an engaging and enthusiastic writing style (Bender, 2003, 53 referring to TEDI, 2000).

Whilst both models intended to express concern and respect for students, only the 2005 model articulated the consultations with students into a collective learning contract. This appears to have been a key difference in the two models as the learning contract formalized class understandings and gave a structured and constant reference point, in particular to the online weeks of the unit and how they would be assessed. Students were provided with a consultation draft of the contract online and via email. After a specified period for comment the contract was accepted as agreed. The collective learning contract appears, therefore, to be an effective tool for demonstrating a commitment to communication and collaboration with students, and consequently can be used to represent concern and respect for students. That is, such contracts can work effectively to evidence that student contributions to designing learning environments are valued. These things had not been achieved in the 2004 model.

Principle 3: Appropriate assessment and feedback

The third principle of good teaching in tertiary environments, according to Ramsden, is that of providing appropriate assessment and feedback. In 2004 assessment consisted of two take-home exams worth 50% each. The marking criteria were provided but not negotiated. The online component of the unit was not assessed. In the 2005 model the assessment was equally weighted across three tasks, two take-home exams and participation in the online discussion forums. The structure and content of the take-home exams, and the marking criteria, particularly for online participation, were all discussed and negotiated with students (and published on the online site). Importantly, also, aspects of the online discussions that had generated significant interest were integrated into the take-home exams.

Whilst a key difference between the 2004 and 2005 models can be found in the approach to student contribution to assessment design, perhaps a more critical difference to the efficacy of the 2005 model was that the online component of the learning and teaching method was assessed. The decision to assess online participation was based on a number of considerations. For example, it was considered important to use an assessment framework to demonstrate clearly to students that this activity was a positive strategy for effective student learning, and not merely an "endpoint of demonstration of performance or capability" (Oliver, 2004, 6). The assessment process was used therefore "as the servant rather than the master of the education process" (Ramsden, 1992, 186), and as an appropriate component of assessment design (Salmon, 2000, 93) in a unit where a key characteristic of student learning for 5 weeks of the semester was its flexible, online nature. Assessing online participation also acknowledged that assessment is a process of critical importance in defining student approaches to learning (Biggs, 1999), and plays a prominent role in "influencing what students learn and the scope and extent of their learning" (Oliver, 2004, 6).

That is, assessing online participation encouraged students to include it within the scope of what they felt was necessary and to be valued for their learning. Certainly, student feedback strongly indicated that

they prioritise more highly aspects of their learning that are assessed. Salmon's comment that "many course designers find that assessment is the engine that drives and motivates students" (Salmon, 2000, 93 referring to Brown, Bull and Race, 1999) was confirmed by the experiences in this project; as is Swan's experience of the successful motivational aspect of using compulsory assessment of an online task as encouragement and reward (Swan, 2004, 2). In this way, assessment of online participation clearly demonstrated to students that the lecturer considered it to be a key component for effective learning in the unit. The 2005 assessment therefore contributed to ensuring that the online environment was an effective place of learning; something that had not been achieved in 2004.

Principle 4: Clear goals and intellectual challenge

The fourth principle of effective learning involves ensuring that students are given clear goals and intellectual challenge (Ramsden, 1992, 100). In the 2005 model improvement to communication and collaboration with students (resulting in the collective contract) could be said to have achieved a more explicit connection between the unit's goals and objectives and the goals of the teaching model being trialled (Biggs, 1999). This communication, as well as assessing online participation, in 2005 can also be considered important in terms of encouraging a student commitment to the intellectual challenge (Ramsden, 1992, 185) of, not only the unit content, but also what was a new learning environment for them.

Principle 5: Independence, control and active engagement

Ramsden's fifth principle concerns the creation of a learning environment that encourages independence, control and active engagement. The basis for this principle is the support in the educational literature for cooperative learning over competitive and individualistic learning (Ramsden, 1992, 101). In both models, there was a focus on discursive, active and collaborative learning which aimed to engage students with "the content of learning tasks" in a way that enabled them "to reach understanding" (Ramsden, 1992, 100). Both models also aimed to encourage students to become active-learners in their own right, thereby promoting student independence (Sheffield, 1974).

In 2005 students perhaps felt a more effective learning environment had been created in terms of this principle perhaps because Laurillard's conversational framework formed the basis of necessitating student activity through conversation; and the assessment of online participation required the students to extend this through writing to online. Both learning environments became "lively, dynamic, engaging and full of life" (Cannon and Newble, 2000, 71) as a result. In the online forum, in particular, student feelings of control were enhanced because the collaborative yet individually timed contributions gave the students "more time to be reflective and provide well-thought-out answers" (Bender, 2003, 65). In the f2f environment the structure to activities and engagement made the classroom a lively, but not pressured or intimidating place (Hativa, 2000). Control was also experienced more explicitly by students in the 2005 model because of the greater focus on student collaboration and negotiation, and the formalization of collective agreement about the teaching model and assessment issues.

Principle 6: Learning from students

The final principle identified by Ramsden is that of ensuring that teachers learn from students. As Ramsden comments, "none of the foregoing principles is sufficient for good teaching. Effective teaching refuses to take its effect on students for granted. It sees the relation between teaching and learning as problematic, uncertain, and relative. Good teaching is open to change: it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying that instruction in the light of the evidence collected" (Ramsden, 1992, 102). The action research basis to this project and its ongoing reflective, collaborative nature has been a specific design element to ensure that the developing teaching model is informed by, and responsive to, student needs; and that it is based on students' real experiences of learning rather than assumptions and approaches founded only on theoretical notions. The process of refining and improving the model remains ongoing, and the specific format of the model for each new semester will continue to respond to each new cohort of students, their needs and contexts.

Conclusion

Both approaches to blending f2f and online learning and teaching trialled in this project were focused on positive student learning outcomes generally, and on making effective learning possible for students, specifically. The 2005 model presented in this paper, is grounded in teaching theory but also attempted to respond to the realities of contemporary higher education and the changing contexts and needs of students. The students' verdict, which is borne out by reference to Ramsden's principles of effective teaching, was that the 2005 model created an effective learning environment, where the 2004 model had failed. This finding is hopefully useful for others engaged with attempting to teach flexibly yet effectively through blended methods.

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